

The logo for Critique d'art, featuring the words "Critique" and "d'art" in red, stacked vertically on a black rectangular background.

Critique d'art

Actualité internationale de la littérature critique sur l'art contemporain

33 | Printemps 2009
CRITIQUE D'ART 33

For a History by Work

Bruno Nassim Aboudrar

Translator: Simon Pleasance



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/555>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.555

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2009

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Bruno Nassim Aboudrar, « For a History by Work », *Critique d'art* [Online], 33 | Printemps 2009, Online since 26 January 2012, connection on 23 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/555> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.555

This text was automatically generated on 23 April 2019.

EN

For a History by Work

Bruno Nassim Abouddar

Translation : Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

Thomson, Richard. *La République troublée : culture visuelle et débat social (1889-1900)*, Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2008, (Œuvres en sociétés)

Charle, Christophe. *Théâtres en capitales : naissance de la société du spectacle à Paris, Berlin, Londres et Vienne, 1860-1914*, Paris : Albin Michel, 2008

Le Miel et le fiel : la critique théâtrale en France au XIXe siècle, Paris : Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2008, (Theatrum Mundi)

- 1 The books by Richard Thomson and Christophe Charle, and the multi-authored volume *Le Miel et le fiel* issue from clearly defined and separate disciplinary fields: art history, contemporary (cultural) history, and theatre studies. None of the three, to all appearances, attempts to go beyond the boundaries of its academic domain. Focusing on a brief period—the last decade of the 19th century—and a small geographical area—France—*La République troublée* looks at the reactive response of painting, and, to a lesser extent, of printing and press illustration, to social issues including the day's liveliest. The politics of the various corpora, first and foremost: medical and moral debates about public health, the prophylaxis of venereal diseases, and thus the social lot of women, be they worrisome prostitutes or comforting middle-class housewives, adultery notwithstanding. Then the horde, as thematically treated by the most recently invented human sciences; psychology, sociology, political science; mobs mutinous and joyous, working-class masses, and the upsurge of inquisitive World Fair visitors. After that, the religious question, a burning one in a France where the anticlerical brigade and sycophants of Catholic reactionariness, plus those advocating that the Church should “rally” to the Republic, all exist cheek by jowl. Lastly, the army and national defence, in a period when the disaster

of 1871 was still defining a revanchist, militaristic and Germanophobic discourse, even when society had come to terms with the consequences of defeat.

- 2 *Théâtres en capitales* deals with a longer period–1860-1914–in a much larger region: Paris, Berlin, London and Vienna. Each cog in the theatrical machine is first analyzed *per se*: theatres (number, aspect, management, etc.), actors (sociology, careers...), authors, the public–or rather the different plural publics, lower class and well-off, with their differing tastes, ranging from conventional to ahead-of-the-times. Statistics and analyses show a constant tendency making the genre increasingly *bourgeois*: pantomime and farce fall from fashion, in favour of the Boulevard and the operetta, relegating the working-class public of London’s East End and Paris’s eastern neighbourhoods to the *café-cum-music* hall. Then, based more on the example of Paris (which, for theatre, was the capital of capitals), Charle describes the theatre (from the comfortableness of auditoria to the reactions of the audience, by way of the repertory) as a society spectacle, prelude to a society of the spectacle.
- 3 The principal ideas advanced in *Le Miel et le fiel*, which are more scattered as a result of the different pens at work, present the same disciplinary centrality as the other two books. After the images of the art historian and the historian’s facts, the literary contributors turn their hand to a little known genre, theatre criticism in the 19th century. Whereas art criticism has been much studied for the period, theatre criticism has actually received very scant attention, for it has to do with spectacles which are by definition ephemeral; they vanish, and are nearly all forgotten about–which is what constitutes its curiosity. We thus follow the training of the various journalistic trades: critics, gossip columnists, serial and feature writers (and even draughtsmen: there was a “pencil criticism” which is of not inconsiderable interest), and instruction in writing methods, some of which tend to harbinger celebrity chitchat more than lit. crit.
- 4 So these are three quite distinct books, in terms of the authors’ respective project, object, method and speciality. There are far-reaching overlaps, stemming from an epistemological viewpoint, which nevertheless go to explain why they are gathered here in a single report.
- 5 These three titles share the fecund heuristic hypothesis whereby works of art and forms of discourse are not only in a reactive, or passive, relation to history, but also, in the concert of discourses forming it, perform a relatively autonomous–which does not mean independent–score. This, in particular, is a real difference, with respect to the customs of cultural history which deals with these works like symptoms and reflections, but also in relation to concepts commonly found in art history, which, for its part, embraces them with the extenuated but unusable category of the influence invariably “suffered” by the work. These three books reverse what must indeed be called a power play. In this respect, Thomson’s demonstration about art and the military issue offers a fine example. He goes as far as to show that the artistic output of the period contradicts what historians took for granted, to wit, that the spirit of revenge, very much still alive and kicking in France in the 1880s, would be “buried” in the following decade. Study of visual documents prompts the art historian to relativize this idea. Similarly, but coming from history this time, Charle shows, in the spirited pages with which chapter 8 opens, how what happens in the theatre–plays performed and public reception–can even anticipate, and thus determine and provoke, a political and social situation. So the play is not the everlasting echo chamber of the historical context. It may be its laboratory. Suffice it, to ascertain as much, to challenge “as a historian” a literary repertory looked down on by literature

specialists, not without one or two sound aesthetic reasons. Whence—and this is again a point shared by all three books—the way the investigation in them focuses on rarely examined objects: naturalist painting, be it “official” or catholic, so disparaged at the end of the 19th century; the *bourgeois* theatre of Emile Augier and Victorien Sardou, never published or performed these days; obscure everyday theatre criticism, all the way to Upper Normandy. And one of the great charms of all this research is the discoveries it encourages, well removed from the log-jammed thoroughfares of avant-gardes and masterpieces.

- 6 An art historian points out as much to historians: an historian points out as much to historians of literature (and in a not very affable tone). Antagonism? Tiffs between cliques? Quite to the contrary, what we must see—and acclaim—here is the shared methodological progress made. The idea that the historical fact (over and above the event, but only just) is partly determined—“influenced” we might say, a tad ironically—by works—the throng of local works, and not only the summits hallowed by posterity—which merit being regarded other than as mirrors, reactionary formations or, worse still, pure forms, discredited by the dogma of art’s autonomy.